

Focus in Irish and English: Contrast and Contact

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## Focus in Irish and English: Contrast and Contact

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### 1. Introduction

It has been recently observed that a shift is occurring in the Irish system of emphasis, with the English system replacing the Irish system—in particular sociolinguistically motivated cases. One could argue that this is yet another symptom of the demise of Irish; or, at the very least, a compelling example of superstratum interference in a language whose symbolic significance shows *no* sign of decline. In this paper, I will discuss focus in Irish and English, how the two systems of emphasis compare, and how a consideration of focus gives us another parameter for exploring the effects of linguistic contact between the two languages in Ireland. The evidence from Irish can also contribute to the broader discussion on the nature of focus itself.

Given the range of theoretical opinion as to what constitutes focus, I will limit myself to the following operational definition, which has allowed me to work with this particular Irish data: *Focus is a highlighting or emphasis of a particular constituent in an utterance; it is not necessarily a binary property, but an additive property whose full implications are realized in discourse contexts.* I am not defining focus in relation to presupposition or background, or topic-comment or theme-rheme oppositions, although these concepts are relevant to the overall discussion. It is my intention to use this operational definition to temporarily sidestep some of the thornier issues that automatically accrue to the various definitions, so that my way will be free and clear to present what I consider to be interesting data in the context of language contact. My notions of language contact and shift follow Thomason and Kaufman's, who claim that a sociolinguistic history, in addition to innate tendencies toward structural change, prompts language shift or change in particular instances (Thomason and Kaufman 1988: 35).

I will use the more generic term "emphasis" interchangeably with "focus" to describe the fixing of speaker or hearer attention on a portion of utterance. I will use "pitch accent," or "voice accent" or "voice stress" to mean pitch prominence in a sentence. "Intonation" is the umbrella term that covers general mention of prosodic phenomena; intonation contours also function as a linguistic unit in describing facts of discourse.

### 2. The different systems

Much of what is signaled by intonation in English is encoded grammatically in Irish. In particular, the most "important" aspect of an utterance will be moved toward the front of a sentence in Irish or be marked morphologically, whereas in spoken English that constituent will be emphasized by a pitch movement (generally up) from a baseline and not (usually) by a constituent-order change. For example, in English we would say *I have a red book* in the unfocused situation, but *I have a RED book* (using voice, or pitch, accent) if we wanted to contrast or emphasize "red." In Irish, a speaker would employ a sentence structure that re-orders the constituents, as in (1a) and (1b):

(1a & b)

Tá leabhar dearg agam.	to:	Is dearg an leabhar a tá agam.
<i>Is book red at-me</i>		<i>COP red the book REL is at-me</i>
I have a red book		I have a <b>red</b> book

Irish also makes a grammatical distinction between what has been called "narrow" or "contrastive" focus, and "broad," or "non-contrastive" focus. For example (2a) is broadly focused, with the function of intensifying the subject NP:

(2a)

Téann síse chun na Mór-Roinne gach samhradh.  
*Goes she.EMPH to the Continent each summer*  
**She** goes to the Continent every summer

The use of the emphatic pronoun in (2a) indicates, as Mac Eoin says, that the statement is true with respect to the emphasized constituent but could also be true of people who are *not* mentioned (Mac Eoin 1986: 27). Compare this with his example in (2b),

(2b)

Is íse a théann chun na Mór-Roinne gach samhradh.  
*COP she.EMPH REL goes to the Continent each summer*  
It is **she** who goes to the Continent every summer

which is to be read contrastively, as precluding all other candidates from consideration. In Mac Eoin's words, "the statement is not true except in the case which is being referred to" (Mac Eoin 1986: 27).

Because the differences between the focus systems of the two languages are so significant with respect to contact, I will describe them in greater detail, starting with English.

### 3. English pitch prominence

Although cleft or pseudo-cleft constructions can be employed, English relies by and large on pitch prominence in the context of the larger intonation contour to signal what constituent of an utterance predominates semantically or pragmatically. In this way, the constituent to which the speaker wishes to draw attention—for reasons of contrast, or new information, or singling out—can be differentiated from other portions of the utterance. The examples in (3), provided by Mac Eoin (pp. 28-29), should seem unremarkable to most native speakers of English.

(3)

Sentence without focus:

(a) My father reaps the corn with a scythe

Emphasis on a possessive particle:

(b) **MY** father reaps the corn with a scythe

Emphasis on the subject:

(c) My **FATHER** reaps the corn with a scythe

Emphasis on the verb:

(d) My father **REAPS** the corn with a scythe

(e) My father **DOES** reap the corn with a scythe

Emphasis on the object:

(f) My father reaps the CORN with a scythe

Emphasis on a noun that is governed by a preposition:

(g) My father reaps the corn with a SCYTHE

Emphasis on a preposition:

(h) My father reaps the corn WITH a scythe

Mac Eoin points out that these sentences can be interpreted contrastively, but they are not restricted to contrastive focus only, as in the Irish case (2b) we've seen.

The pitch prominence or voice accent system of English in and of itself cannot be represented in written form, except through typographic conventions like italicization, underlining, or boldface type which are outside of the writing system per se. These conventions are not acceptable in all registers, especially formal contexts such as academic prose. For example, Mac Eoin, in discussing his use of linguistic terminology, is able to position himself in relation to other linguists when he writes the following (4a):

(4a)

Tá cuid mhaith scríofa ag teangeolaithe ag iarraidh na cineálacha  
*Is part good written at linguists at attempting the kinds*

treise a mhíniú agus ní hé ab áil liomsa  
*stress.GEN to explain and NEG-COP it REL desire with-me-EMPH*

míniú nua a thabhairt.  
*explanation new to give*

A faithful translation into English would have to resort to typographic devices to fully capture his meaning, as in my version in (4b):

(4b)

There's been a good bit written by linguists trying to define the types of emphasis and **I** [among all the others] would not like to give a new definition.

#### 4. English clefting

Both Irish and English use cleft sentences to focus or emphasize a particular constituent by bringing that constituent toward the front of the utterance after a copular form, although there are certain differences between the two languages. English cleft sentences include those in (5) from Mac Eoin (p. 29).

(5)

Sentence without focus:

(5a) My father reaps the corn with a scythe

Emphasis on the possessive particle:

(b) It is MY father who reaps the corn with a scythe

Emphasis on the noun:

(c) It is my FATHER who reaps the corn with a scythe

Emphasis on the verb: Does not occur.

Emphasis on the object:

(d) It is the corn that my father reaps with a scythe  
Emphasis on the prepositional phrase:

(e) It is with a scythe that my father reaps the corn

It is interesting to note that sentences (5b) and (5c) cannot be differentiated in surface form without relying on pitch accent to disambiguate them, as the capital letters indicate. Nor does the system allow for emphasis on a finite verb—a constraint which also holds for Irish.

## 5. Irish morphology

To turn now to the Irish system of focus, we will see that morphology and clefting accomplish what in English is done mostly by phonology and secondarily by clefting. There is no voice stress system in Irish. English speakers use pitch accent where an Irish speaker wouldn't—or grammatically couldn't. This is not to say that pitch prominences do not occur, but they are considered to convey affective states, or to realize intonation contours for discourse reasons, or they show up under conditions of excitement. When salient pitch prominence does occur, it is used in tandem with the focus strategies of the Irish language. Various informants have said that with few exceptions pitch accent means nothing to an Irish speaker in terms of focus or emphasis. A sentence with pitch accent is ungrammatical.

Focus in Irish is realized in part through the morphological strategy of a system of unaccented suffixes. Emphatic suffixes attach to personal pronouns, prepositional pronouns, nouns and verbal nouns before which there are possessive particles, adjectives which modify possessed nouns, and synthetic verbal forms (cf. Mac Eoin and The Christian Brothers). The person in question (possessor, subject, etc.) is then in focus. The regular forms of these suffixes are given in (6).

(6)

1s	-sa (se)
2s	-sa (se)
3s	-san (sean) (m.)
3s	-sa (se) (f.)
1p	-e
2p	-sa (se)
3p	-san (sean)

In all cases in which suffixes are used, focus or emphasis is taken to be on the animate being referred to in the sentence. Mac Eoin (1986) lists the following Irish examples in (7). The suffixed forms are underlined.

(7)

Focus on the possessive particle:

Sentence without emphasis:

(a) Baineann m'athair an t-arbhar le speal  
*Reaps my father the grain with scythe*

Sentence with morphological emphasis:

(b) Baineann m'athairse an t-arbhar le speal  
*Reaps my father the grain with scythe*

Emphasis on the pronoun:

Sentence without emphasis:

(c) Baineann sé an t-arbhar le speal

*Reaps he the grain with scythe*

Sentence with emphasis:

(d) Baineann seisean an t-arbhar le speal

*Reaps **he** the grain with scythe*

Emphasis on the verb: Not possible.

Emphasis on the object:

Sentence without emphasis:

(e) Baineann m'athair le speal é

*Reaps my father with scythe it*

Sentence with emphasis:

(f) Baineann m'athair é sin le speal

*Reaps my father **it-that** with scythe*

(Here the demonstrative particle is used in place of the emphatic particle on the inanimate "grain.")

Emphasis on the prepositional phrase:

(Again, the demonstrative particle, which is linked etymologically to the emphatic particle, is used because the the pronoun refers to an inanimate thing):

Sentence without emphasis:

(g) Baineann m'athair an t-arbhar léi

*Reaps my father the grain with-it.*

Sentence with emphasis:

(h) Baineann m'athair an t-arbhar léi sin

*Reaps my father the grain **with-it-that**.*

Since emphatic suffixes that attach to nouns do not emphasize the noun itself, the reflexive pronoun **féin** is used in those cases, as in (8):

- (8) . . .go dtf go raibh sé níos aoirde ná Jimín féin.  
 . . .*until REL was it COMP big than Jimmy self*  
 . . .until it was bigger than JIMMY.

## 6. Irish clefting

In the Irish cleft system, the part of the sentence that is to be emphasized is brought to the front with the copula (cf. Mac Eoin and The Christian Brothers). As Ó Siadhail states, "There is a close relationship between the word order of the copula sentences and its function of bringing an element into focus" (Ó Siadhail 1989: 250). This relates to the general principle invoked by fluent Irish speakers that the constituent the speaker wishes to emphasize or bring into focus is brought to or near the front of the sentence. It is the cleft system which underpins that principle. I've listed Mac Eoin's examples in (9), which can be compared with (7):

(9)

Sentence without emphasis:

- (7a) Baineann m'athair an t-arbhar le speal  
*Reaps my father the grain with a-scythe*  
My father reaps the grain with a scythe

Emphasis on the possessive particle:

- (9b) Is é m'athairse a bhaineann an t-arbhar le speal  
*COP it my father. EMPH REL reaps the grain with a-scythe*  
It is **my** father who reaps the grain with a scythe

Emphasis on the subject:

- (c) Is é m'athair a bhaineann an t-arbhar le speal  
*COP it my father REL reaps the grain with a-scythe*  
It is my **father** who reaps the grain with a scythe

Emphasis on the verb: Not possible as such, but options are:

- (d) Is é (rud) a dhéanann m'athair an t-arbhar a bhaint le speal  
*COP it (thing) REL does my father the grain A- reaping with scythe*  
**Reaping** is the thing my father does (to) the grain with a scythe.

- (e) Is amhlaidh a bhaineann m'athair an t-arbhar le speal  
*COP thus REL reaps my father the grain with scythe*  
It is thus my father **reaps** the grain with a scythe.

- (f) An t-arbhar a bhaint le speal, sin é (an rud) a dhéanann m'athair  
*The grain A reapingwith scythe, that is (the thing) REL does my father*  
Reaping the grain with a scythe, (that) is (the thing) my father does.

Emphasis on the object:

- (g) Is é an t-arbhar a bhaineann m'athair le speal  
*COP it the grain REL reaps my father with scythe*  
It is the **grain** that my father reaps with a scythe

Emphasis on the prepositional phrase:

- (h) Is leis an speal a bhaineann m'athair an t-arbhar  
*COP with the scythe REL reaps my father the grain*  
It is **with the scythe** that my father reaps the grain

As in English, the cleft system of Irish does not differentiate between focus on the possessive pronoun which qualifies a noun and focus on the noun itself, without drawing in the emphatic suffix, as can be seen in sentences (9b) and (9c). There is no cleft form for verb focus, because it is not possible for verbs to be predicates of the copula. The options available for verbs are included in (9d- f).

In the case of an intransitive verb, one brings the verbal noun (a noun derived from the verb that serves the purpose of the English infinitive or gerund) to the beginning, and puts a suitable tense of the verb déanam *do* in the relative clause, as in Mac Eoin's example in (10):

- (10) Titim de chrann a rinne sé  
*Falling from tree REL did he*  
 Falling from a tree is what he did, or  
 He **fell** from a tree

When a tense of the verb which involves a prepositional phrase is employed, as in *ag baint at reaping* in (11), it is possible to put this prepositional phrase at the front with the copula, as in (12).

- (11) Tá m'athair ag baint arbhair le speal  
*Is my father at reaping grain.GEN with scythe*  
 My father is reaping grain with a scythe
- (12) Is ag baint arbhair le speal atá m'athair  
*COP at reaping grain .GEN with scythe REL-is my father*  
 My father **is reaping** the grain with a scythe

There are other grammatical situations in which focus clefting is relevant. For example, in the case of a copular sentence—Irish has both a copula and *be* verb, like Spanish—the predicate complement of the copula is moved to the front, as in (13c). Sentence (13a) is the non-emphatic statement, and (13b) employs the emphatic suffix.

- (13a) Is dochtúir mé.  
*COP doctor I*  
 I am a doctor.
- (13b) Is dochtúir mise.  
*COP doctor I.EMPH*  
 I am a doctor.
- (13c) Dochtúir is ea mise.  
*Doctor COP it I*  
 I am a **doctor**.

In summary, if we compare the two systems in Irish and in English we notice various differences between them, besides the ones already mentioned. First, while it is possible to put emphasis on any part of the sentence through the pitch prominence system of English, it is not possible to emphasize a constituent other than an animate being by the emphatic suffix in Irish. So the Irish system relies on cleft sentences for emphasis on other constituents.

Second, the pitch accent system of English by itself can convey broad or narrow focus on a constituent, in that focus selects from a pool of possible candidates in the broad case, and exempts all other candidates in the narrow case. The same is not true of Irish sentences with emphatic suffixes. Broad focus is possible through the suffix system, and narrow or contrastive focus through clefting. Mac Eoin suggests that there is a greater distribution of cleft sentences in Irish because the cases in which the emphatic suffixes apply are so restricted.

## 7. Implications for contact

Now that the distinctive differences in the two languages' focus systems have been established, it is possible to consider the particular implications for language contact. What appears to be occurring now in spoken Irish is a tendency for some speakers to use the English phonological system of pitch accent to focus constituents, instead of the strategies that the Irish language itself offers. For instance, Mac Eoin (1986) cites usages like the ungrammatical (15a), in which the non-stress-bearing preposition provides the focus

- (15a) \*Tá an leabhar AR an mbord  
The book is ON the table.

instead of the grammatical, clefted construction of (15b);

- (15b) Is ar an mbord atá an leabhar  
*COP on the table REL-is the book*  
The book is **on the table**.

and (16a), in which the unstressable possessive pronoun is taking stress,

- (16a) \*Sin é MO leabhar  
*COP-that it my book*

instead of the construction in (16b) that uses the emphatic suffix:

- (16b) Sin é mo leabharsa  
*COP-that it my book.EMPH*  
That's **my** book.

This change is recent, Mac Eoin says, and is heard among people who speak a great deal of English (1986: 35), a judgment corroborated by native speakers of the Connemara Gaeltacht. The change is significant, because it indicates the degree to which English is influencing the language structurally. It also shares some parallels with a rapid shift process that occurred some 300 years ago in Ireland.

In the earlier instance, the political domination of the British, by the 17th century, extended to social and educational realms (cf. Ó Murchú 1985). English was the dominant language, used for High linguistic functions and as such it carried the prestige in diglossic communities. As the 18th and 19th centuries progressed, literacy in Irish was legally restricted, and other anglicizing influences, like eradicating Irish place names, held sway. A period of transitional bilingualism during this time resulted in a rapid decrease in the Irish language, and an abrupt rise in English. Negative language attitudes towards Irish, among uneducated and rural native speakers as well as among both Irish and English speakers with economic and educational advantage, cemented this stratification (Ihde 1994: 33). The result was—and is—a dialect of English known presently as Hiberno-English, the variety of English spoken by people in Ireland. According to Thomason and Kaufman (1988), Hiberno-English is the result of substratum interference: imperfect group learning during a process of language shift, such as occurred under British domination.

A consequence of contact is the striking intonation patterns of Hiberno-English, the remnants of "the prosodic features of the original language [which] are very frequently maintained in a shifting group's version of [the language they are to be learning]. . .if they haven't learned those of the [target language]," according to Thomason and Kaufman (1988:42). Besides the intonation contours, features of Hiberno-English include dental stops from the Irish inventory in place of English dental fricatives, as in "t'ing" for "thing"; a habitual usage of *be* to match the usage of the cognate Irish verb *bí*; and a recent past construction using "after" (as in *Look what your daddy's after doin' to my trumpet*, meaning *Look what your daddy's just done to my trumpet*—from the 1991 film *The Commitments*) to match the use of *indhiaidh after* in Irish constructions. Mac Eoin would also add to this list of characteristics the high frequency of cleft constructions or verb fronting in Hiberno-English.

Examples of Irish-influenced English cleft constructions are easily found in the Hiberno-English of Irish films and literature. The sentences in (18) include a range of examples from Irish playwright John Millington Synge's drama, "Deirdre of the Sorrows." Notice the copular structure followed by the focused element in the sentences in (18a), and the reflexive pronoun that emphasizes particular pronouns in (18b), both strategies in the Irish focus system that have influenced the forms of English speakers.

- (18a) It's a dark sky and a hard and naked earth we'd have this night in Emain.  
It is I will be your comrade and will stand between you and the great troubles are foretold.  
It's for this life I'm born, surely.  
It's little I heed for what she was born.
- (18b) Here's health, then, to herself and you!  
Yourself should be wise surely.  
There's herself on the hillside with a load of twigs.  
Conchubor'll be in a blue stew this night and herself abroad.  
Let you not be talking too far and you old itself. (=and you so old)

The Irish language has continued to decline in this century, and its former low status among speakers, as well as the economic advantage of knowing English, has hastened the process of language loss. At the same time, it has managed to remain strong as a *symbol* of Irish nationhood. Revival efforts in the past 50 years have begun to reverse the erosion in many respects, but it has also brought with it other problems that are affecting the status of Irish linguistically. The strong dialect group affiliations have in some sense hindered the revival; with no standard dialect, and no dialect group willing defer to another, a compromise standard that includes features from all the dialects, known as *An Caighdeán*, was instituted for education and government functions in the 1950s. The result is what is known as "school Irish" or "book Irish," a variety spoken primarily by native English speakers, which brings its own influence to bear on the language, as we might guess from the preceding discussion of Hiberno-English. But this time the prosodic features of the English language are being maintained—in cases where the speakers are dominant in English—at the expense of the non-prosodic options available in Irish, as Mac Eoin and others have documented.

School Irish is not considered "good Irish" by native or near-native bilingual speakers. But it is a relevant phenomenon, because it is the variety used

by most Irish-language print and broadcast media, and as such is widely disseminated, particularly through the national Irish-language radio station. It is through School Irish that we are beginning to see once grammatically questionable constructions reanalyzed as acceptable locutions, a fact that shows that the dominant language of use—English—is having a profound effect as the Irish language is being revitalized (John McWhorter, pers.com.). The recent evidence from focus points to superstratum effects upon a substrate language. As the complexities of the Irish focus system remain inaccessible to semi-speakers, the options familiar and available in English will come into play—a shift that mirrors to some extent the development of Hiberno-English.

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is easy to see lexical evidence of contact in Irish (such as British "pub" used by native speakers in the Connemara Gaeltacht instead of Irish "teach tábhairne"), but evidence of contact is also present in the less obvious but deeper context of sentence structure and consequently, discourse organization.

Examination of focus and emphasis in Irish leads us to questions with larger implications for language study, such as what is the *role of intonation*—in particular, phonological pitch accent—in a language where sentence structure and morphology have until now provided the focus cues. According to Cruttenden, for many languages pitch accent occupies a secondary role to word order, and as such the other systems must be studied alongside pitch accent placement for a full consideration of what focus comprises (Cruttenden 1986: 147). Another question is how intonation in a language that doesn't rely on voice accent plays into the *larger structure of discourse*; how would Irish fit into an account such as Ford and Thompson's which correlates intonational completion points with grammatical and semantic ones at turn-taking transitions.

In another linguistic context, evidence from Irish could be added to existing data from other languages concerning grammatical and intonational presentations of *focus*, and perhaps refine our definitions—or at the least, challenge our received assumptions. One standard definition of focus explains that one of the "correlates of neutrality or non-neutrality, in English and presumably in all languages, is stress and intonation" (Lyons 1977:504), which in Irish—and in other languages we can think of—is strictly not the case. Other definitions view focus solely as new information, a position which Chafe (1976) has argued persuasively against. While many researchers have come to agree that focus is a relevant component of the grammar, and not merely a stylistic overlay, how it functions, and the extent to which its properties can even be construed *as* focus, varies by definition—perhaps reflecting ambivalence in relation to the earlier position. To what extent should the "expressiveness component" of intonational structure, to use Selkirk's terms, be separated from its informational or focus structure component—this issue, too, varies by definition.

Considering focus on a *pedagogical level* is also relevant, especially for an endangered language undergoing a small but enthusiastic revival. While there is discussion of "emphatic constructions" in the grammar books, there is virtually no sense of the discourse context in which a form would most likely be used.

Finally, study of the focus system of Irish points to the relevance of social context (cf. Thomason and Kaufman 1988) in assessing the direction and extent of *language shift and change*. The number of lexical borrowings into Irish, considered one factor in the robustness of a language, is not a clear indicator because English

loanwords are a status marker in Irish (cf. Watson 1989) and don't necessarily imply an imminent demise. Neither do the various phonological changes, such as the disappearance of initial consonant mutation, which could be viewed as internal development, especially since they vary by dialect. Therefore, the consideration of focus gives us another, important parameter for discovering what effects linguistic contact has had and is having on speakers of English and speakers of Irish in Ireland.

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